



Better Lives for Older People

That's an achievement today's medicine can point to with pride. Here an expert tells how a "quiet revolution" began

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A MUSIC TEACHER friend of mine recently told me about a rather special pupil, an 86-year-old retired minister who had decided he wanted to learn to play the cello. In a fairly short time he was expert enough to play chamber music. He continued to take lessons and play chamber music until his death at the age of 94.

Such an achievement is greeted as extraordinary, while if a person in his 20's did the same thing it would be considered routine. Why is there such a difference in our reactions?

For most people, the image of old age suggests ill-health, infirmity, loss of energy and ambition, memory lapses, physical and mental deterioration, and as Shakespeare called it, "second-childishness" — all of which is accompanied by a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, frustration and futility. Is this image an accurate one? Let us look at some facts.

There are over 17 million people in the United States over age 65. Of these, only about five per cent cannot care for themselves because of organic and/or mental illness. There is nevertheless in our youth-and-action-oriented culture a tendency to devalue the old person, to consider him, consciously or unconsciously, as worthless and useless. Unfortunately, not only do young people have this attitude but oldsters themselves tend to view their old age with a loss of self-respect and self-esteem.

But there is today a gradually changing attitude toward old age. More and more physicians and related scientists are devoting themselves to the study of aging. There has been a quiet revolution in the management and treatment of various disorders which plague older people. This revolution puts the lie to the notion that nothing can be done for them.



1. Physical rehabilitation affords a dramatic example of this new attitude. What can be done was demonstrated by a group of scientists at the University of Michigan. In their study one third of the patients already institutionalized for custodial care were able to leave the hospital after six months of an intense rehabilitation program; and in marked contrast, only five per cent of those *not* treated intensively could leave the hospital.

Another remarkable story is that of a man who at age 57 suffered a cerebral hemorrhage. His left side was paralyzed, and he could not speak. His condition was regarded as hopeless, but he had an intense motivation to get better. After two years of diligently following ingenious rehabilitation techniques this man not only learned to walk again, but he now plays golf and scores in the 80's.

2. Psychotherapy is another area of change. Until recently few, if any, psychiatrists would consider an elderly person eligible for psychotherapy for emotional and mental disorders. Aged people were considered to be rigid and inflexible.

Now we know better. In my own work with elderly patients I have been impressed with how much can be accomplished. I can also report for those who believe that old people are somehow "different," that they have exactly the same wishes and hopes — for independence, for prestige, for understanding, for love — that I hear from my psychoanalytic patients in their 20's.

3. Mental abilities of old people have also been re-examined. Contrary to most beliefs, many studies indicate that old people are capable of learning and being creative. There are many examples of people like Grandma Moses, Winston Churchill, and Verdi, who composed music in his 80's.

Every June we read about grandmothers and grandfathers who are proudly accepting college diplomas, and we have evidence that the mind retains its capabilities far longer than most of us have thought.

I DO NOT INTEND TO suggest that, because some elderly people can learn new tricks, everybody should be able to do so. This could be heartbreaking for all those who try for goals beyond their abilities. But a great many older people, if they approach learning with reasonably modest goals, could increase their self-esteem and satisfaction, and achieve a livelier life.

But they need encouragement and guidance, and they must get rid of the fear that they are "too old to change."

Culver



GRANDMA MOSES: She became a famous and beloved artist in her 80's

Rate parties

jeep. He wanted to know if some of the smaller communities had gotten hold of agricultural data he sent out.

"Yes, we have," shrugged the patriarch of the village. "But we look at these papers, not yours." He held up a Chinese Communist leaflet on rice growing. Why? Listen to him explain:

"People came in very big automobiles," said the village elder. "They must have been important to come all the way in such great cars. They came to see us."

Naive? Yes. But his reaction was important, no matter what they say back in Washington.

Even in far more developed and worldly surroundings, you'll find bewilderment about our cut-rate presentation to the world. In Warsaw a young pro-Western writer took me to task for something seemingly trivial.

"Why can't your people answer letters faster?" he demanded. "The Russians do."

Simple answer. We were short on clerical help. No funds were available for even another full-time secretary.

Communists don't stint

Speaking of money, I wonder how many Americans realize that the State Department is budgeted annually at about one-third of what it costs to build a modern aircraft carrier. That has to cover salaries, travel, entertainment, maintenance of mission installations and cables.

It's really rough, on that kind of money, to keep up with the diplomatic Joneses, especially the Communists, who don't stint. Just think: In a smaller Embassy with 30 people on the payroll, the whole entertainment allowance for a year

ng Compares with Others

sies are suffering from penny-pinching is for entertainment (or representational) and and those of other countries in Washington.

\$19,325 for a recent year. In Washington, \$58,000 and \$62,000 that year — just about

ht budget of \$12,400. The Soviet Embassy a on one party.

d, compared with an estimated \$50,000 for

end; the Italian Ambassador in Washington

ritish embassies in several different capitals Bonn and Moscow, the British ambassador's ince" runs far over the U.S. ambassador's ce." In Moscow, for example, the British S. ambassador's allowance.



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